

The Heart is Hollow by FeoplePeel

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Summary:

Ten years ago, Nancy brought Eleven home. Will Byers paid a price for it. All of this was before Holly's time, but that doesn't mean she can't save the day now.

1. Bryce, Neurobiologist

Author's Note:

For hermosx, who has waited long enough, and for Bal, who reminds me why I love fandom. May we find ourselves weaving into the same ones forever.

This is a sequel to *Across the Many Miles*. It can be read as a standalone, but if you're interested in the universe that spawned it, go check that story out. When I had people in the comments asking for a sequel my first thought was something very sweet (actually my first thought was "Haha, no thanks."), maybe from Will's point of view. I don't know where this came from, but I hope you enjoy it!

1996, Hawkins, Indiana

Bryce watches Mike tug at the sleeves of his jacket while he pulls at the fingers of his gloves. It must not be too cold to him, but Bryce has spent the last three years in California and twenty years in Texas before that. Hawkins, Indiana is frigid on a good day; the middle of December is decidedly bad.

It's near three and they've stopped outside of a little diner. A copse of pine on the side without parking and stretching to the back, the other leading into the town. He would ask Mike why they haven't driven straight to his parents, but he's seen the tightness around the corners of his mouth when he talks about the suburbs of Indiana.

Some reunions are going to be more difficult than others.

Bryce is going to offer to find a booth but Mike overrides him, ringing the bell with such vigor that the heads in the diner turn and glare.

"El!" He rings the bell again, even though a woman is marching out of the kitchen with a furrowed brow. The wrinkles ease when she sees Mike.

“Mike,” she has straight hair, held back in a short ponytail, and her smile is soft. Bryce has seen photos of her in Mike’s room, has heard this voice on the phone when Mike has to put it on speaker to keep both of his hands free.

So this is Eleven.

No one knows, at first sight, that the person who chooses the seat next to them in a joint Neuropharmacology course will be their best friend, study partner, roommate...that person you go to when things get bad at home.

So, when Bryce met Mike six years ago, he asked the same banal question he asked every other student.

“Major?”

“Bioengineering. You?”

“Neurobiology.”

“Oh, wow!” He sounds excited, but his face is bordering on mischievous.

“What?”

“I’m just thinking about a friend. I can’t decide if she would hate or love for me to have taken that career path.”

Bryce is silent for a moment before holding out a hand. “Bryce.”

He shakes it, a little more enthusiastic than the situation warrants. “Mike Wheeler!”

“...Nancy Wheeler’s brother?”

“Geez, does everyone know her?”

Her picture just got put up in the main hall. It’s large and uncomfortably ostentatious between the scowling old men. At the thought of it, Bryce manages a smile. “Get used to it, Wheeler. You’re

new royalty.”

“I’m Eleven,” the woman holds out a hand and his eyes travel up and up and to her name tag which says *Jane* in beautiful, spiral pink. He slips his palm into hers without considering how firmly he should shake. A nice break from working with doctors and scientists.

“Mike talks about you a lot,” he offers the truth. Names slip in and out of Mike’s stories from his youth in Hawkins and there aren’t many to remember. Eleven stands out, though. It’s an odd name.

It’s fitting. She’s an odd woman. He knows, for instance, that she entered high school late and graduated top of their class anyway. That she used that knowledge to open an abandoned diner a few miles from her house. He knows Mike’s been convincing her to buy a computer for the past two years, but she doesn’t trust them and she especially doesn’t trust *e-mail*. He knows that she, like Bryce, is a product of *the system* (and he tries to keep from curling his lip, thinking of that).

“Good.” Eleven guides them to a booth. Bryce takes a seat across from Mike. “What brings you down for Christmas?”

“Ten siblings, so mom and dad won’t mind a missing few.” Bryce explains as vaguely as he can.

“Ten?” Eleven’s eyes go saucer wide. It’s cute, for a woman who must be at least twenty four.

“Yes, there are *eleven* of us.” He drops a quick wink. “Adopted, mostly. My folks were....*charitable*.”

“I’ll say,” Eleven grabs the elbow of a passing waiter, the only other person working in the place from the look of things and snags two menus from his arms to place in front of them. “So Mike convinced you to come to Indiana instead?”

“I think he felt bad for me.”

“I *did*,” Mike makes a face, chin in his hands. “This guy spends every break watching M.A.S.H reruns on our couch, it’s pathetic. I come

back and the whole place smells like potato.”

“You’ve got a bad habit, Mike,” Eleven winks in an almost perfect imitation of Bryce’s earlier gesture. “He likes taking in strays.”

There’s a joke there, by the way Mike reaches up to punch her shoulder.

“Catch me up,” Mike moves to let El slide into the booth beside him. “What fresh madness has descended in the past six months?”

They chat while Bryce’s eyes skim the menu items. He’s good at picking up information with an ear. The chief is retiring but she’ll believe it when she sees it. *Is Indiana known for potatoes? Or is that Idaho?* Her mother is cognizant more often these days. *That’s interesting, her mother was the one who...* and her aunt is still working with a woman who must be her foster mother. *Joyce Byers. Eleven doesn’t have the last name.*

Byers. Why does that sound familiar?

Bryce doesn’t think Indiana is known for a particular food (he will later be loudly informed that this is *incorrect* over a piece of sugar cream pie, though he doesn’t know if that counts as *real* food), so he picks a potato with ‘all the fixins’.

“Oh, Mike,” Eleven catches the sleeve of his jacket as they’re setting out to leave. He pushes something small and white into his hands. A piece of paper, Bryce guesses. “Nancy thought you’d stop here first.”

Mike pushes whatever it is into his pocket with a tight smile. He touches the back of her neck lightly and, though he’s not much taller, still has to duck to press his lips to her forehead.

Bryce watches from a distance, considering the circuits of nerve cells that must be lighting up in Mike’s brain while he stands at war with himself. Bryce has heard people outside of his line of work credit the human heart (a fascinating muscle, undoubtedly) with the power to move on, accept, love...but the human brain...

Mike turns to the door with that too bright smile as though nothing is wrong. “Ready to go?”

Bryce doesn't need to be introduced to Nancy Wheeler (*the* Nancy Wheeler, his mind supplies), but she looks at him for a moment as though she has no idea who he is.

"Bryce, my roommate," Mike says, voice as flat as Bryce has ever heard it. "Remember?"

"Right, right!" Nancy waves her hands in front of her face. "Sorry, I'm...distracted. Mike, can we talk inside? Bryce, you're welcome to come in too, of course."

"That's fine, I'll wait in the car." Bryce offers and Nancy smiles gratefully. A muscle in Mike's jaw tics but he doesn't sigh. Bryce opens the passenger door and slips inside before anyone else can speak. The note, Bryce thinks, probably prepared him for something to happen between here and home.

Here must be Nancy's house. It's yellow and relatively small with a fenced in front yard. It doesn't *look* like a place Nancy would choose but Nancy doesn't spend much time Stateside anyway. It may be a friend's house. It's none of Bryce's business...

A black cat is trying to scratch his way through the door. He can see Mike and Nancy's silhouettes inside the right window.

Face off. Nancy paces away. Pace back. Face off. Everything in their mannerisms is tense and uninviting. He's glad he decided to wait out here.

Bryce has never been comfortable around Nancy. She's a Caltech alum, so there's always something to fall back on when conversation threatens to die. Her expeditions to the Himalayas have brought funding to the college like no one before, and interesting stories to boot. She's seemed nice enough, every time Bryce had the opportunity to interact with her...but for reasons beyond him, every nerve in his body screams at him to stay away from her.

And he trusts his nerves.

Two knocks sound to his right and he jumps. A man, thirties maybe,

with an almost amused expression is staring into the car. "Hello. Loitering is a crime, you know."

Bryce opens the door because the man is carrying bags of groceries. His earlier assumption about his being a friend's house must be true.

That or Nancy has a very *diligent* neighborhood watch.

"Are you a cop?" Bryce leans over to turn off the car and pockets the keys

"I'm a social worker. But the deputy lives here too, so..." The man's eyebrows furrow. "Is this Mike's car?"

"He's inside." Bryce steps out and offers a hand. "Let me help you with those."

"You must be Bryce." The man's whole face changes as he hands off one of the bags reluctantly. "I'm Jonathan. Jonathan Byers."

Something clicks into place from his conversation with Eleven. This isn't exactly the time to examine the thought, though. "Nice to meet you," is what Bryce says, instead.

They don't talk until Jonathan's juggling his bags to reach for the handle. Nothing against the guy, Bryce hates social workers as a rule...which is also not their fault. It's his parents, the system. He has a whole litany of curses and childhood trauma he's working through.

Nancy and Mike are in another room, only popping out long enough to see who stepped in.

"Problem?" He asks Mike when they've settled the grocery bags in the small kitchen. Jonathan is refilling the cat's food. Nancy moves from room to room with stacks of folded bedsheets and a few clothes, more like she's setting the place up than cleaning it. Her eyes catch Mike's but can't seem to hold them. It's the most subdued Bryce has ever seen her.

It's also telling that Mike needs to think so long before answering. "Nah. Same stuff, different season."

A nurse meets them at the front of the hospital and, at this point, with the sun creeping past the edge of the skyline, Bryce *knows* Mike's putting off going home. But Mike greets the man with a hug and a smile, so at least it's for a good reason.

"You're the neurobiologist?" The man says before Bryce can lift a hand to wave.

Mike laughs. "Bryce, this is Dustin."

"Sorry, hi!" The Dustin from Mike's recountings is recognizable when he pulls the cap away from his curls and smiles big and bright. He pats Bryce's shoulder and, for a moment, Bryce is afraid he'll be pulled into a hug as Mike was. To his relief, Dustin only uses the hand to drag him off down a hallway. "Come look at this!"

"Bring him back in one piece!" Mike yells after them and Bryce shoots an urgent look over his shoulder.

Dustin has a patient with a rare form of epilepsy. It is interesting, and Bryce tells him as much but it only makes Dustin's face fall.

"No super secret progress in the field then, huh?"

Bryce lays a hand on his shoulder. "I can send the hospital some papers, but they're all experimental, at this stage. I don't know any doctors outside of teaching hospitals who've even risked them."

Dustin nods. "We don't have grade A medical facilities. Even when they get sent to Indianapolis, it's not as good as it could be."

"If her doctors are anything like her nurses, I can say for a certainty that this hospital is doing its best for her."

Dustin rolls his eyes, obviously pleased, and slings an arm over Bryce's shoulder. "Come on, my shift's over in five."

Mike's on his phone when they exit. "Well, we're heading there now so pack it up, Grand Slam."

"Lucas?"

Mike pushes the antenna down, blowing a breath through his nose. "I can't believe he started a *sports* club. For playing an actual physical sport."

"It's tennis, man." Dustin shakes his head and drops his arm from Bryce's shoulder. "He has to watch a ball go back and forth for a few hours. Not much physicality in that."

"You want to take that one?" Mike raises an eyebrow.

"Too easy." Bryce smiles.

Lucas is the only one of Mike's friends that Bryce has met in person. He came to a teaching conference out in California two years ago and Bryce drove the five hours north it took to meet him.

The moustache is new.

"Bryce!" Unlike Dustin, Lucas *does* pull him in for a hug, if only to whisper, almost conspiratorial. "Feels *good* to have another black man in Indiana."

That pulls a laugh from him. "Yeah, I didn't know this was the chalk state."

"Knew if I warned you, you wouldn't come." Mike snorts from behind his shoulder. "Now what's this I hear about you letting your students crush *our* science fair winning streak?"

"Not letting, man," Lucas grins, "*encouraging*. That's what happens when you shape young minds instead of play around inside of them."

Mike holds his chest as though physically struck. "Low blow, Lucas. Low blow."

They spend a good few hours with Dustin and Lucas and, eventually, Eleven at Dustin and Lucas' house (bigger than Nancy's--or Jonathan's, he supposes--but not by much), taking turns playing Resident Evil.

But they had to come here, eventually. *The Wheelers* in bright red on

a white mailbox.

Mrs. Wheeler seems nice, welcomes Mike home with a hug and a kiss. Bryce receives the same treatment even though they've never formally met, so Bryce not only wonders why they put off coming for so long. He wonders why Mike is lying about having not seen Nancy since they came into town.

He asks him when they're upstairs, a safe distance away from Mrs. Wheeler's hearing.

"I don't really care if she finds out, but if I tell her I went to Nancy's she'll have to ask me if I spoke to Holly. Then *I'll* have to tell her that Holly wasn't there."

Holly, Bryce knows, is Mike's younger sister. "Where is she?"

Mike lifts his hands into the air, the sort of gesture that says, *'well what can you do?'* which isn't a Mike-like gesture at all. "Who knows? When Holly gets tired of Mom and Dad fighting, she stays with Nancy. Mom finally swallows her pride and calls, Holly comes home. That's how it used to work anyway. Maybe things have gotten so bad between Nancy and Mom she's just decided to wait her out. That or she's found somewhere new to go."

"Your mom and Nancy don't talk?"

"Sometimes...loudly." Mike snorts. "Mom doesn't agree with the boys Nancy likes."

"Jonathan seemed nice."

Mike considers this, lips pulling down into something like a grimace. "Yeah he is, I guess."

"Is that what your sister wanted to talk to you about?"

"Uh, yeah." Mike looks at him for a second too long before answering. "Yeah, that's what she wanted to talk to me about."

Bryce guesses it speaks to the quality of his friend's character that he's such a shitty liar.

It's on the cusp of sleep that Bryce remembers where he's heard Byers before today. Why Jonathan and Joyce sounded just that little bit off.

1992, Pasadena, California

"Who's he?"

Bryce hasn't been inside Mike's apartment before now. Not for lack of care, it's only that Bryce's place is closer and Mike has some real space issues. Not issues about letting people *into* his space...issues about his apartment *having no space* because it's consistently cluttered with projects small and large. Today was the first time Bryce had been able to walk through the entryway without destroying something important.

"He who?" Mike sets his glass down, leans across the couch to grab at the picture in Bryce's hand. "Oh, that's Will."

"He stay in town?"

"Kind of."

Bryce laughs. "Kind of?"

"Hawins is...Hawkins is weird, man."

Bryce can count, on one hand, the number of times he's seen Mike Wheeler drunk. He gets so maudlin it's unnerving. And he always says the same thing: *Hawkins is a weird town. I'd invite you to meet my folks, but Hawkins...man.*

Bryce has a mind for names and faces, but he's not surprised he doesn't remember Will's. Mike put the pictures of him away after that. Bryce falls asleep wondering why.

2. Holly, Not-So-Jolly

Holly finds Steve where she always does; in the farthest corner of Eleven's diner. It's a booth close to the door of the kitchen where he can sneak in and add more spice to people's orders when the cook isn't paying attention. Sometimes he lets her play lookout.

He doesn't look up from the book beside his plate when she slides into the booth across from him. It's written in Spanish but she's seen enough of her mother's trashy romance novels to recognize one on sight (besides, Steve only openly reads the Spanish books when it's a romance, like no one's caught onto his little trick). "Thought you were at our place."

"I was. It got boring."

Steve had tried scolding her once upon a time, like Nancy except not because Nancy was too much like Mom where Steve was all poking jokes with too much truth. Now he just sighs and slides her the rest of his pancakes. "You can come to the station or go to Joyce's. Those are your options."

"Station," she says between bites.

"Good. We've needed a paper jockey since Flo retired, and you put in enough hours that we may as well pay you."

Holly knows nothing ever happens at the police station. Nancy works at the only interesting place in town and not a damn thing worth talking about comes from anywhere beyond the scrap of land near Cornwallis.

Holly *knows* for certain that nothing ever happens, so she almost misses when it does.

"Aren't you a little young to be manning the desk?"

Holly doesn't realise she's being addressed at first. Everyone in town knows her, overlooks her presence on the assumption that she's here

for extra credit or some sort of community service (*those Wheeler kids, so smart*). When no one answers she looks up the lines of a crisp, black suit to the face of a man who resembles a B-List movie star. Tan skin and salt and pepper hair and unnecessary sunglasses to complete the whole picture.

In her mind, Holly drapes across the arm of her seat like an old film star herself and says something clever about her age and men.

In reality she continues staring and eventually manages a less than elegant, “Uh.”

“I’m here to see Chief Powell.” The man takes off his glasses and walks past her and, movie star looks or not, the new receptionist is more picky about her lunch breaks than Flo so that leaves Holly pressing a button on the phone. Two rings until she hears a familiar voice on the other end.

“Hey, Steve? There’s a man here for the Chief.”

“Give a name?”

She covers the receiver and turns to the row of chairs where the man is examining pictures on the wall. “Name, please.”

“Ficken.” He tells her without looking away.

She waits for another word, but nothing comes so she repeats the one into the phone. There’s silence for a moment and then. “I’ll take care of this one. Send him to me.”

The other thing that Holly knows about Hawkins station is every good place to spy. She settles herself against a table beneath the main office clock. The coffee maker doesn’t work in this corner, but there’s a perfect view to the Deputy Chief’s office in its rounded chrome and, if she stands just to the left of the air conditioning unit, she can hear every word that’s said in the small room.

“What are you doing here?” Steve crosses his arms. “I thought Hawkins was a neutral zone.”

“Not sure what Wheeler’s been feeding you, but there’s no such thing

as a *neutral zone*.” Ficken seems to melt into the chair, his hands around the coffee mug. “My job would be a hell of a lot simpler if there were.”

“Well, tell me as much as you can.” Steve adjusts the papers on his desk. He told her once it was a trick adults used to look busy and, ever since she learned it, she’d been able to see it everywhere. “It’s *bound* to be interesting, at least.”

“I’m here about Will Byers.”

That seems to wipe away most of Steve’s good humor. Holly doesn’t blame him. She’s known Will since she was a baby, grew up on the stories of the boy who came back from the dead. Even got to poke at the truth of it, eventually. Will is still...strange. Not like Eleven, who doesn’t *want* to leave Hawkins. He just can’t. Trauma, her mom tried to tell her once. But Holly’s read the files Nancy never meant for her to see, learned the truth of that too. Sometimes wonders if she’d be able to see the little monster burrowed inside his brain if she used one of those ear magnifiers at Doc Pat’s.

Thinking back, stealing those files from her sister’s briefcase was probably what started she and Nancy’s first fight...or was that when she had started fighting with mom? They all blur together now.

“Nancy’s brother brought someone new into town. We know the protocol for new people around Will but let’s work extra hard to keep these two apart, if we’re able.”

“Any special reason for that?”

“He’s a neurobiologist. A decent one who works with...*influential* people. We don’t need him getting more curious than he already is. He’s run into the brother.” He stops speaking at the look Steve shoots him and continues more slowly, “*Jonathan*. We can’t help collateral but we can *minimize*.”

“I thought you only worked in,” Steve motions in the air in front of him, “containment. Cover up.”

“It is, in a word, both.”

Steve stares the desk, before asking. "Does Nancy know about this?"

"Yes, and Jane. I come to you now because, well, to be frank I don't trust my partner when it comes to Mike Wheeler."

Steve laughs. "I'm surprised you trust me."

"I trust you care more about the safety of Will Byers than the feelings of Mike Wheeler."

"Fair enough."

Holly's nearly finished a math book she's assigned herself from the library by the time Steve's done for the day.

"You ready to go home?"

"No."

"Too bad." He ruffles her hair and she ducks her head, letting it happen with a wince.

Of course he means his home. He and Jonathan have a strict non-involvement policy when it comes to the Wheeler family past a certain point.

"Good book?" Steve asks in the truck as she's skimming down the last few pages.

"*Boring* book," she admits. She'll never be as smart as Mike or Nancy, she knows. Has to work twice as hard as they ever did (and that's *with* her extra credit projects), but she learned early that the best way to keep adults out of her hair was through the power of an excellent report card.

She leaves the book in the seat of the truck, not wanting to talk quantum *whatever* with her sister more than anything. Holly had once joked that Nancy would have married math if it were legal...not that Nancy cares much about the sanctimony of marriage.

"Hey, Lady," Holly ignores the smaller cat vying for attention at the

window, making a beeline for the old black one stuffed in the corner of the couch. Like Will Byers and the old truck Steve drove them from the station in, Ladyhawke has also been a presence seemingly all of her life. The cat butts her head into Holly's palm.

She hears voices *trying* to stay whisper low in the kitchen, but the acoustics in Steve's small house don't allow for any private conversations unless you're in a bedroom. Still, Steve's speaking in Spanish so she only catches familiar words like *por* and *dice* and names--*Will* and *Ficken*-- and figures Steve must be catching Jonathan up from earlier in the day.

"Hey, Holly," she hears Jonathan call a moment later. "You staying for dinner?"

Ladyhawke curls into her lap, forcing her to sit more firmly on the couch. She doesn't have to consider her answer at all.

"Yes, please."

Two Days Later

"I'm not sure this is a good idea, Holly."

"Hush up Will! He'll be here, he *promised*."

"...all right."

They don't have to wait long, a crunching to their left signaling another's arrival.

"You must be Will. Sorry I'm late, these woods are crazy." The man holds out a hand. "I'm Bryce. Pleasure to finally meet you."

3. Steve, Deputy and Teen Wrangler

"He came to *you*?"

"Trust me," Steve holds up his hands, "same reaction."

"Wish I had thought to ask Nancy more about the guy when Mike brought him around." Jonathan's lips pull down into a frown as he turns up the heat on the stove. "To be honest, with the vibe they were giving off, I was more worried that Ted had said something again."

"Karen hasn't said anything."

"You've got a lot of faith in her." Jonathan's look tells him he doesn't feel the same, and then some.

"She'll come around."

"Steve, you've been saying that for years."

"Well," Steve grins at him. "That's why it's future tense. She *will*." He says, more reassuring, he hopes.

Jonathan ignores him. "You think Mike brought him here on purpose?"

"I know you don't like the idea of people messing around in Will's head--"

"I don't like the idea of *Ficken's people* messing around in Will's head," Jonathan interrupts to correct. The *not even Nancy* hangs heavy in the air, an old argument between the three. Strangely, Nancy seems to understand it better than Steve.

Will had been unable to leave Hawkins since they 'fixed' the cracks around it ten years ago. Some Upside Down residue clinging to Will like a cancer. Closer to a worm, was how Will explained it. Steve avoids hospitals when he can, but he saw the brain scans, incomprehensible as they were. No way to remove it on this side of the world, and Nancy's never pushed the Byers to probe any deeper

than they're comfortable with Ficken at the helm. Maybe because she has a brother herself.

Most probably, she still blames herself.

"Having someone else take a look might not be a bad idea," says Jonathan in a low voice, leaving his spoon over the boiling pot atop the stove eye. "Bryce didn't seem like an evil mastermind."

"That's the trick," says Steve, reaching up to tap the side of his nose. "Those evil masterminds never do. Ficken seemed to think he might have connections to people who shouldn't find out about him."

Jonathan gives him a look. "More like Hawkins and whatever they're doing in that lab."

"Probably," Steve concedes with a nod. "Wouldn't be the first time he's played us into a corner."

"Or the second," Jonathan mutters, pulling out a cutting board. "Or the third."

"Look, I know it's Will and I *knew* you'd be...," Steve trails off, taking in Jonathan's raised brow, "understandably upset," he finishes, delicately.

"I appreciate your overwhelming concern, Harrington." Jonathan's lips twitch up at the corners.

"Still," Steve's tone is contemplative, but he's watching Jonathan cut peppers with a wide-open, pleased expression. "I don't think Nancy would have said anything to Mike if she didn't have a good reason for it."

"What's the point of Ficken's damn out-of-towner protocol if he's just going to isolate Will whenever he feels like it?" Jonathan presses his palms against the counter for a moment, breath coming out sharp and quick before he gathers himself again.

"Are you seeing the real problem I have with this?"

Jonathan's eyebrows draw together. Steve reaches out to press at the

crease between them. "Tell me."

"Even if we thought listening to Ficken was a good idea, when have *any of us* ever been able to keep those kids from doing whatever they wanted to?"

Jonathan huffs out a laugh. "And they're all grown up now. No telling what they have up their sleeves."

"Speaking of out of control kids, I have to go," Steve rounds the counter, pointing at his mouth. "Bésame."

Jonathan rolls his eyes but presses his lips to the corner of Steve's lips, regardless. "Why are you leaving, this is going to be done in ten minutes."

"Yeah, and where the hell is Holly?"

Jonathan leans back, looking to where he had spoken to her last, curled up on the couch with Ladyhawke pressed against the side of her leg. "Shit," he runs a hand over his brow. "She was *just* there."

"Kids, eh? Take your eyes off of them for a second."

"Where does she even go?"

"If I knew I wouldn't have to run a search party every time." Steve takes Jonathan's distraction as an opportunity and seals their lips together again. "Were you drinking egg nog?" He asks when they break apart.

"Yes?"

"Hot."

"You're so weird, Steve." Jonathan pushes him towards the door, but the insult only earns him a wink.

"You know, I told Abuelito I wasn't having children," Steve shouts from the door, shrugging into his jacket with a sigh. "And here we are."

“Probably shouldn’t have shackled up with a social worker.”

“Touche.”

He finds her at Will’s, which would have taken a great deal longer had the man not called him. It’s not as if Holly and Will don’t get along, he’d just never have pegged *this* as one of the places she would willingly choose to run.

Maybe she’s running out of places to hide.

Will’s house is small--fit for one person, possibly two if you like it cozy--and bohemian with a lot of artsy shit that Will’s made or his friends have brought him through the years. It’s settled too close to the edge of the woods for Steve’s comfort, but Will seems to like it. It suits him.

“I can’t believe you ratted me out.” Holly’s leaning against some lightning rod art piece and kicking it with her heel when Steve approaches the door.

“I don’t harbor fugitives.” Will raises a hand in greeting, and Steve dips his head.

“I was just visiting,” Holly argues. “I thought we were buds, Will.”

Will gives her a look that says, to Steve at least, he doesn’t buy what she’s selling for a second. “Normally I wouldn’t mind but I’m having company tonight. So scram.”

“Company or...*company*?” Steve bends to snatch Holly’s backpack from the ground, holding it out for her. Will shoots him a flat look, chastising, that is far more telling than he’d probably like. “Hey, how you keep convincing people to come to the boonies of Hawkins is beyond me, but congratulations.”

“It’s a talent.” Maybe it was his traumatic youth, or his now equally traumatic adulthood, but Will has promoted *scathing sarcasm* to an art in a way Jonathan has never been able to. If it weren’t for the fact that Steve used to babysit him and haggle over turtle ownership rights, he might fear him.

Well, only a little. He's still the town deputy, after all. He has to show *some* backbone.

"Mom says you can't trust people on the internet." Holly takes her backpack, slinging it over her shoulder. "They're all old men or pervs."

"Well I'm kind of hoping for both of those things to be true." Will huffs out a quiet laugh.

"Now she listens to her mom." Steve pushes Holly's shoulder, earning him a small smile. "Say bye."

"Bye, Will," says Holly, obediently. "Good luck on your date with the creepy old perv."

Steve watches Holly jump into the passenger seat of his truck before turning back to Will.

"Something going on I need to know about, Steve?"

Steve tries not to look as caught as he feels. "No, can't think of anything. Why?"

"This isn't Holly's typical haunt," he looks around himself.

"You're telling me," Steve breathes out through his teeth. "Seriously, it's not...", he trails off. "Do I need to worry about this? Whatever's happening tonight?"

"I don't know, Deputy Harrington." Will crosses his arms, and the word 'deputy' comes out the way that most people say 'moron'. "Am I an adult who can take care of myself?"

"Man, I have to go back home to your brother," Steve pleads. "You know how he gets!"

Will sighs but the corners of his lips are twitching in a manner similar to Jonathan's. "His name is *James*. He's visiting for a few days from Minnesota."

"Does he have a wife?" Steve asks and raises his hands when Will's

eyebrows draw down in frustration. "What? You remember Bill? Bill had a wife!"

"Good *bye*, Steve."

"Snap a photo of his ID," Steve shouts over his shoulder as he makes his way to the truck. "Just in case!"

"Are you *serious*? You're more paranoid than Jonathan, you psycho!"

"What can I say," Steve winks, taking a moment to appreciate the slowly forming look of disgust on Will's face. "He's rubbed off on me."

"What was it this time?" Steve breaks the silence in the front seat a few minutes after they leave. "Your mom didn't call, so you didn't duke it out with her. Nancy's been at work so I know you're not fighting with her. I'm serious, I'm really scratching my head over this one."

"You seemed like you needed to talk to Jonathan alone." Steve risks a glance over and sees she's picking at her fingernails. It's not a Nancy-like practice, Steve muses absently. No, playing with his cuticles or pressing down on the tips of his fingers too hard had always been Jonathan's habit. "You kept whispering."

"I'm sorry," Steve sighs. "We weren't fighting if that's what you thought."

She shakes her head.

"Well, okay," he nods quickly, hands tightening reflexively on the steering wheel in preparation for what he knows he has to say next. "We're not your parents. We can't punish you, you know? But if your mom and dad get it in their head to come looking for you at ours and you're not there...,," he draws in a breath. "Jonathan puts kids in good homes. Kids in way worse shape than you, Holly, and they may not let him do that anymore. And I'm a cop! Do you know how much shit I'd be in?"

"Mom isn't going to nark on you," Holly snorts. "She's too scared of

Nancy.”

Steve’s glad he’s at a red light because he has to shut his eyes for a moment. Holly is young, and for as angry as she is at her mother, he has to remind himself that she doesn’t understand everything. Doesn’t *need* to understand everything.

“Adults don’t always act in their own interest when it comes to protecting their children,” Steve tries, diplomatically. “And whatever you might think about Karen, she *does* love you.”

“No, yeah, I know that,” Holly mumbles, sitting on her hands and going resolutely still. He’s said the same words to Nancy, and seen the same reaction *countless* times. He’s still not sure if it’s helping.

He presses a little harder on the gas pedal, hoping irrationally that the sound of the engine will drown out his words. “You’re fifteen, Holly. Unless you’re coming to meet one of us or tell us where you’re going, you need to talk to someone before you leave. Capisce?”

Holly stares at him for the space of a few heartbeats before smiling. “I’m sorry. I promise it won’t happen again.”

Steve nods and thinks the whole exchange was a bit too simple, even with their usually good rapport.

Two hours later, free from his fog of worry, Steve gets the feeling he’s overlooked something important.

Two days later, he realises exactly why that was.

4. Karen, Mother and Mediator

Notes for the Chapter:

Mentions of divorce for those it bothers. I normally keep all of my tags in the tags above but this is such a character-specific one, so apologies for that!

For her son being back home, it doesn't feel like it. Karen sees more of Michael's new friend than She sees Mike. She's glad he met Bryce. He's polite.

"Mom doesn't agree with the boys Nancy dates."

Karen heard it in the hallway, decided to leave the extra linens by the door instead, half wondering if Mike had meant for her to. If she had any questions about how much Bryce knew about their family--or rather didn't know--that answered them.

Things had been somehow easier with Nancy off in California, Mike set to follow her. She could trick herself into thinking Jonathan was a good friend at best, an unwelcome tagalong to Nancy and Steve's budding romance at worst. She may have even turned a blind eye towards it, as Joyce seemed to do every time the uncomfortable issue arose between them.

But, she thought with familiar resignation, *Ted*.

Even he had noticed after a time. Well, with Mr. Harrington still in Costa Rica she supposed he was the only father around to pay it any mind. Shouldn't Steve care? Another man hanging around Nancy so much? Ted hadn't gossiped with her since just after high school. She remembers when they started dating, he had been incorrigible about it and she had loved it.

It was almost by accident that she let her own theory slip, what might actually be happening.

She hears the front door open over the sound of bacon sizzling. Ted home from another overnight shift.

“Welcome home, sweetie.”

“Hey, Mom.”

Her hand pauses mid-motion, spatula hovering over the pan. She lets out a breath.

Holly, thank God. She turns to offer a smile then starts making breakfast more quickly, tangible relief swelling and pushing her through.

“I ate breakfast at Nancy’s.” Holly pulls out one of the kitchen chairs. Karen hears her backpack land with a thump. “She wasn’t home though. Workaholic.”

She remembers how combative Nancy was at this age. But Nancy never had an older sister to run to when...*deep breath in.* The therapist told them that isn’t why running away happens.

“Of course,” Karen says. “We need to go shopping for school.”

“Jonathan has to take some of his kids, I can go with them.”

“I could go with you,” she offers, trying not to sound pleading. “Bring the list and gift cards? I’m sure there are kids there who’ll need some extra help too.”

Holly looks at her like she’s sprouted an extra head but she chews it over. “Sure, whatever.”

Holly looks relaxed enough to explain where she’s been, besides the usual grunt of *Nancy’s*, when the front door opens again, certainly Ted this time. Karen’s figured out that Holly’s scheduled her visits home when her father’s here but that doesn’t mean she speaks to him more than she has to. She’s made it clear where she stands.

Ted looks as surprised to see Holly as Karen was, but he recovers well. “Long time no see, young lady,” he says. Holly glances at him, then down, picking absently at her nails. “Where have you been?”

“Ted,” Karen calls him to her side, “there’s bacon.”

He ignores her, crossing his arms. "Holly? Look at that, Karen, she's not listening to me, just like her brother. That's all right I only pay for their school."

He doesn't mention Nancy. Holly turns her accusatory stare to Karen. Because she doesn't want to look at Ted? Because she's not taking her side? Because she's lashing out at her mother for not divorcing her father? Karen doesn't know--she's no therapist--but she'll take Holly's wrath over her silence.

She can't explain to Holly, at fifteen, why she hasn't left. Joyce Byers understood, nominally, the one time they discussed it over her last cigarette three Christmases ago. She thought Mike had a firmer grasp now, though he still clearly *wants* to do something.

And Nancy...

Mike walks downstairs and whatever Holly was going to say in response is thrown to the wayside in lieu of running at her brother with the full force of her teenage weight. He takes it in stride, scooping her up and letting her stand on his feet.

"Mikey!"

"Hey, Hols!"

"Michael, there's bacon on the back eye." Karen flicks the oven off and unties her apron. Mike shoots her a look over Holly's head. "Ted," Karen cuts a glance at the kitchen's only other occupant. "A word? *Upstairs*."

She takes the steps two at a time and doesn't turn to see if he follows.

"You can't just...hound her as soon as you walk in the door Ted."

"I didn't know asking a reasonable question of a teenager we take care of *by law* was hounding."

"The therapist says--"

He scoffs, closing the door behind him louder than necessary.

"Says that forcing her to talk will just make her close off more," she pushes through the interruption. "We need to work backwards, figure out what triggered it this time. You may not give a damn but I'd like it if *one* of our children left home and decided that coming back meant more than Christmas."

She sits on the bed and crosses her arms. She once heard Ted jokingly refer to it as her *fighting stance*. The feedback was useful; he can't say he isn't prepared when he sees her waiting. Ready.

"Oh has Holly started referring to this as home again? That's a new development." Ted takes off his tie and throws it into the closet. "I wouldn't know, since she won't talk to me," he shrugs. "Guess I'll have to ask her therapist if I want to know something about my own daughter now."

"Can you blame her? You kicked her sister out of the house!"

"Don't put that on me." He takes a breath, adjusts his glasses. "That's a lie."

"Good as the truth when you leave her no choice." Karen's smile feels like rubber.

She remembers her own choice. Remembers Nancy calling her in a panic because Ted--exasperating, unthinking Ted--was threatening to contact the other members of her alumni committee. To call Steve's parents, the new Chief. Nancy would never know about Karen's suitcases packed by the door, her own threat to leave until Ted promised not to say a word. Holly knows, wonders why she can't leave *now* with Nancy in such a secure position and the...well, the men in her life just that. Men. Perfectly capable of taking care of themselves.

But until they leave Hawkins they're not safe. Men like Ted, like Lonnie Byers, are more dangerous than monsters. And women like Karen are better equipped to fight them, despite what her children think.

"Karen," Ted's voice draws her back. He rubs the space between his brow, expression almost placating. "You spend all day at home, huh?"

You're with her all the time. Why is this always my fault? We have two kids we can keep down the right path. So why is it we always come around to talking about the one who didn't?"

"Because she *didn't* go down a bad path, Ted!" Karen takes her own breath, squares her shoulders. "Nancy's an adult. Nancy *is fine*."

Ted makes a face, head shaking like she knew it would.

"She's paid back her tuition," she continues before he can speak. "She put herself through grad school, and by my estimation, makes more money than you do."

Karen wants to add that Nancy is happy. That she's healthy, but she doesn't know about those things. She doesn't like Nancy's job; she worries.

"Take a nap, wake up, *apologize* to the daughter that can still look at you," she stands, leans over him. He's frowning now that he's calm. "We took the wrong path with the other one and I think a part of you knows that."

Ted doesn't take a nap. Ted finds his tie and goes back downstairs and out the door. She isn't sure where he goes when their fights get bad--she hadn't *thought* this one was so terrible--and on some level she'd stopped caring. Been relieved he left so Holly wouldn't.

Mike is still in the kitchen downstairs. But sitting next to him is Bryce, not Holly and Karen feels a moment of panic that must show on her face.

"Holly's in the shower," Mike shoves a piece of bacon in his mouth and comes around the kitchen aisle to pull a chair out for her.

"Think I might take up the other one if you folks don't mind?" Bryce motions upstairs and Karen turns red. She had temporarily *forgotten* about their houseguest and their yelling had likely driven him downstairs.

Mike waits until Bryce is upstairs to settle in the seat beside her, dragging his plate across the table in front of him. "It got pretty loud.

You okay?"

She lays a hand over his. "Fine, sweetie."

"Fine?" he laughs. "Like Nancy?"

She squeezes his hand. "You shouldn't spy." It takes her a moment longer to ask, "Is she? Fine, I mean."

Mike sighs. "I don't know, Mom. She's always been a little cagey. Why don't you call her and ask?"

This time she laughs. Mike finishes his bacon and they migrate to the living room.

"The worst she can do is tell you to fuck off."

"Michael! Language!"

"Mom...", Mike starts and she *knows* what he's going to say. She cuts him off.

"I love this house." She looks around the room. "You took your first step in that corner right there." They stare at it for a moment, Karen longer than Mike. "I'm strong. I raised strong kids. I know it's hard, but I'd rather be strong enough to hold out hope for your father than...", she wipes at her eyes. "Its been so long I can't remember what I'm like alone. More than that, I don't *want* it. I just want settled."

"You don't even seem that," Mike leans back into the cushions. "I know you think you're...protecting her in some weird way, but staying in a marriage trap to do it isn't helping." Karen opens her mouth but he cuts her off this time. "And you won't be alone, Mom." Her mouth closes with an audible click. "You're right you *are* strong, but you're not strong enough to take losing Holly."

Above them a door opens and the blaring of a shower radio cutting off lets them know it's the teenager in question.

"Just think about it please?" Mike leans in to whisper. Karen nods, wiping at her face once more before Holly enters the room just

in case. The girl still gives her an odd look, but nothing too far from her usual stare, before plopping down between them.

“Make room, nerds,” she says and they oblige with mild groaning. “*Moesha’s* on.”

Karen enjoys the rare sensation of having her children back on the couch, bickering over the remote. Well, two of them.

The worst she can do is tell you to fuck off.

It's not the worst Nancy can do, Karen thinks, not by a long shot, but she excuses herself to the kitchen anyway, taking the phone to the dining area just past.

It's not Nancy that picks up, of course, but Jonathan. He has always been pleasant with her, whatever he thinks. Maybe it's because she almost singlehandedly keeps his mother's print shop in business. Maybe he's like Steve, with a soft spot for mothers. She's afraid to ask why he's so nice when Nancy will hardly speak to her.

“Hello Mrs. Wheeler, did Holly make it home?”

And always he asks after Holly. He is, by all accounts, good at his job. Another reason why Ted could not have been allowed--can not *be* allowed--to go around repeating such slander. Jonathan is a good friend to the Wheeler children. To Nancy.

She takes a deep breath. She doesn't know if she'll ever get used to it.

“She's fine,” she says and adds after a moment's thought, “Thank you for feeding her.”

“Oh. You're welcome,” he pauses. “Steve is out. Nancy too. Want me to have one of them call you back?”

“My money's on Steve,” she says before she can help herself.

“What?”

“I just meant...nevermind. How is she? Nancy? Holly says she hasn't seen her lately,” Karen tries to sound casual and knows how

impossible that is. "Is she working too much?"

Jonathan is quiet for a while, only confirming what she suspected. "Um good, yeah she's good. She's still here three or four days a week."

"She's eating healthy?"

"All her fruits and veggies."

"Okay, good," she says, steadier. "...How are you?"

"I'm...fine," he sounds surprised. "How are you, Mrs. Wheeler?"

She almost says *Karen, please* but stops herself. "Decorating, planning festivities. Are Joyce and Jim still getting the family together for that lovely pre-Christmas party?"

She winces. She hasn't actually attended in three years, when Holly started using Nancy's house as an escape from home and the Wheeler's battle became, to Karen, more a Cold War.

"Yeah." He's not much of a talker, she thinks.

"I might come," she says, as much of a warning as she'll give.

"Well, Mom invited you. She must want you there."

"It would just be me," she adds. "If you don't mind?"

"It's not my party." He's quiet for so long she thinks he's gone. "But I appreciate the call. And the...other thing."

She hums. There's a tinkling of glasses from the kitchen then complete silence. "Thank you, Jonathan. Take care of yourself."

"You too, Mrs. Wheeler," he says. "I'll tell Nancy you called."

She keeps her eyes on the phone as she makes her way back into the kitchen and places it on the receiver. Holly finishes pouring her glass of grape juice and looks up guiltily.

"You coming with me to the Byers Christmas?" Holly turns her glass

a few times in her hands.

Her children...spies, all of them.

"Are you okay with that?"

"It's cool," she takes a sip of her juice. Karen smiles at her retreating back. "Make that broccoli cheese casserole!"

It is not Steve who calls.

"Mom?"

"...Nancy?" She's stunned mute for a moment. "Is Holly okay?"

"What? She's...fine, Mom," Nancy sounds like she's working with something on her end of the phone. "Listen, has Mike had any of the guys over?"

"No, he's mostly been lazing around."

"Huh," the noise stops on Nancy's end then picks up again. "I would have predicted differently. Nothing new there."

Predicted. "Nancy," Karen takes in a breath through her nose. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing...", she trails off. "Jonathan said you called?"

"Ah," she winces. "Do you have Steve's father's number?"

"Why?" Nancy's tone is immediately harsher.

Your father left yesterday and still isn't home. "I might need legal counsel. Discreetly."

Nancy let out a quiet *oh*. "I have it but I don't know how much help he'll be from Costa Rica. Why don't I give you his old partner's number instead?"

Karen nods before realizing Nancy can't see her. "Yes, thank you."

“Everything okay, Mom?”

“I’m as *okay* as you are, I imagine.”

“My job is to do things that aren’t safe, we both know that so I won’t *lie* to you.” Nancy’s silence is weighted with something. “But honestly, I’m fine.”

“Be...as safe as you can, Nancy.”

“Feel better, Mom.”

5. Will and Eleven, The Upside Down Siblings

Will

Will Byers is stuck in Hawkins.

It had become a fact of his existence to walk, or drive, to the edge of town and be smoothly deposited back on the same street, on the opposite end. He didn't know at what point after bringing El back from the Upside Down, fixing the cracks around the town, this had happened. To him, it didn't matter. It *had* happened.

The advancement of the internet had been a godsend. He's fairly sure, by this point, he has more game than his friends, combined. It's therefore more than a little discouraging being potentially cockblocked by a fifteen year old runaway.

"Holly, what are you doing here?" Will steps back from his door, fresh from the pounding of Holly's fist, feeling a little lost.

"Yeah, hey Will," she sounds almost dismissive. "We gotta talk, buddy."

"No, please, come in," Will says, because she's already made herself comfortable on his couch.

Holly doesn't remind him of his high school days. Holly doesn't really have a group of friends or, if she does, she never talks about them. Never clings to them the way he did his own. Even Nancy had Barb before she had Jonathan and Steve. All Holly seems to have is a group of adults watching her back, for good or ill.

Will likes her. She's annoying in that unabashed teenage way that requires twice the effort for none of the expected results. But she's five kinds of lonely and Will gets that. Will doesn't know everything that happened between Nancy and the Wheelers. Will isn't sure that even Holly knows *everything*. She's formed an attachment with Casa Harrington steady enough, for long enough, that he's sure she must know *enough*, and chooses to stand beside her sister anyway. In his mind, this means she's on Jonathan's side and that's good enough for

him.

Still...when she goes to heat up a hot pocket, he calls Steve. Just in case.

"All right," he says when she makes her way back to the couch with sticky fingers and a glass of milk. "What was so important that you had to rush over here to tell me?"

Holly nods, swallowing her drink. "You know a guy named Ficken?"

"Nancy's boss?" Will says. He doesn't add his personal opinion of the man.

"I guess that explains why no one wants to mess with him."

Will tries very hard not to roll his eyes. "Holly, just tell me what happened."

"Okay," she finishes the rest of her glass, leaning forward. "Listen to this."

Eleven

"Seven down is Recondite." Eleven drops the wrong plate in front of Steve to see how long it takes before he notices.

Unfortunately Jonathan is across from him, coughing and crooking a finger. She dutifully switches their plates.

"Which?" Steve takes the pencil out of his mouth, bending over his crossword and reaching blindly for his coffee.

"Seven. One credit that might be difficult to account for," she crosses her arms. "Recondite."

"Smarty pants," he fills it in, smiling up at her.

"You're doing *last week's* crossword, dumbass," she rolls her eyes. Jonathan takes a bite of his bacon to keep from laughing.

"Do you ever serve people here, or just sit and talk with them?" someone says, close to her ear. She turns slightly to see Bryce and, hanging up their coats, Mike.

"Bryce," she says, feeling her mouth lift into a smile. "Good to see you."

"She grew up with a chief of police so she runs this place like a station," Steve leans forward to get a better look at the newcomer. "Letting the peons do the work--ow." He winces and pulls away as she smacks him with a menu. Jonathan snorts into his coffee.

"Hey, Steve," Mike slides into the seat next to him. "This is Bryce."

"Friend from school?" Steve's eyebrows raise and he extends a hand to greet him. "Thought I might meet you soon."

"Bryce, this is Steve Harrington," Eleven finishes the introduction with a wave of her hand. Bryce takes his own seat next to Jonathan. "And my brother says the two of you have already met."

"Brother?" Bryce looks between them, openly curious.

"Small town," Jonathan says with an easy smile.

"Wow, Mike *and* a brother? Must have been a handful."

"I can take care of myself."

"I'm sure you can," he seems to be fighting a grin.

"Besides what's two compared to...what was it you said? Ten?" Bryce laughs. "You want some bacon?"

"Love some."

"Mike," she nudges Mike's foot with her own. "It's just me until noon. Help me in the kitchen."

"Speaking of brothers," she says when she's sure Mike is following her. She has to hiss over the sound of the bacon. "You've been home three days. Have you even bothered checking in with Will?"

Mike suddenly looks too hang-dog for her liking. "You mean he's not too busy with his internet posse to hang out with his real friends?"

"Knock it off," she hits his chest with the back of her hand. She doesn't say that those *friends on the internet* have been edging closer to Will's real friends lately.

"I *wanted* to...I ought to bring Bryce to see him, whatever Ficken has to say about it, right?" Mike says, like he's begging. "Will's the whole reason I brought him down."

"You don't think Ficken's figured that out? He's going to be watching you," she points at him with her spatula, "like a *hawk*."

"That's what Nancy said." Mike sighs, rolling his eyes. "What can he do?"

"Nothing, to you."

His lips thin into a line and he slams his hand against the countertop. She smiles, sympathetically. "I know."

"He'll be here til Christmas, with all of us," she points out. "Just give him a long leash and see where things land. You got him here. Don't be stupid, now."

Eleven stops by Will's house on the way home from work. He takes one look at her and slumps.

"Oh good," he says, motioning her inside. "I don't have to clean."

She smiles. The place is near immaculate but she won't say anything. "Mike brought a friend for Christmas. You were mentioned and I thought I'd check in before Christmas Eve snuck up."

"A friend or a *friend*?" Will waggles his eyebrows, making room for her on the couch and sitting.

"I didn't ask," she deflects easily.

"It's okay," he leans back on the cushions with a sigh. "Holly came

banging down my door yesterday like this new guy was the second coming. Steve didn't even mention him. May have been distracted by the fact that Holly ran away *again*." He grins wide and full of false cheer. "Of course neither of their opinions matter much since I'm not allowed to meet him."

"Ficken said you shouldn't...", she knows it's a weak gambit the second the words leave her mouth.

"You trust that asshole?" he pulls his legs up. "Why? Because he never ratted us out to his bosses? Because he helped us, *once*? My dad gave me a band-aid once, I'm sure. I still wouldn't call him from the side of the road."

"I don't know if we can trust him, but sometimes what's good for him has been good for us," she says, and adds after a thoughtful moment, "Mike brought him here to meet you, you know?"

Judging by the look on Will's face, he clearly didn't. Her friends should talk less to her, and more to one another, she thinks. She takes the seat beside him, looking him up and down.

"Are you okay?"

"I'd be better if my so-called friends would stop trying to protect me to death, thanks," he grinds out. "Mike couldn't tell me this himself?"

"You knew he was home, why didn't you come down the hill to say hi?" Will shrugs, avoiding her gaze and the question. It's an old move that still fails to impress her. "I'm sure you can guess how Ficken explained things to us. It's a little telling that he didn't come to see you at all."

Will's head snaps in her direction. Granted, it probably sounded harsher than she intended but...Ficken is a scientist. Will never straying from home even though he can go as far as the edge of Hawkins; it's not a criticism, it's an observation.

"I may not trust Ficken, but I trust Mike. And, no, I don't think he would have brought anyone here to hurt you." She takes a deep

breath, in and out. She knows he's curious. "Holly's good," she says. "Holly's not being watched the way that Mike and Nancy are. The way I am."

He spends a long moment scrutinizing her, his sister in all but blood, and finally nods. "I got it."

He gives her the diner's books before she leaves. She's grateful, she thinks as she eyes up his maze of wires and tech in the room farthest away from the door. She doesn't trust computers. "You know you should learn a little of this. I could be doctoring that. Skimming from the top."

"Are you?"

"No, but I could."

She shrugs. "Take as much as you want as long as you keep the diner open."

Will

This is how Will finds himself, two days later, waiting outside of his house for a man he's never met with Holly by his side.

"I'm not sure this is a good idea, Holly." He marches in place, choosing to ignore the sidelong look this gets him from her. He's too busy trying desperately not to think of how stupid this whole thing is.

"Hush up Will! He'll be here, he *promised*."

He examines her profile. Determined, almost angry. How many times had he and his friends tried to convince adults, at fifteen, of things they needed to listen to and been routinely ignored? Holly seems so sincere even now...

"...all right."

Will tries not to make it too obvious when he places himself in front

of her at the sound of crunching leaves. But it's only a man, who he assumes to be Bryce, as promised.

"You must be Will. Sorry I'm late, these woods are crazy." Bryce holds out a hand and Will looks him in the eye as he takes it. He looks about as confused as Will feels. "I'm Bryce. Pleasure to finally meet you."

"Will," Will raises a brow. "Can't say I've heard as much about you as you probably have about me."

Bryce takes the hint for what it is. Drops his hand to cross his arms. "I've not heard a lot either, to be honest. Enough to be curious."

"Come inside."

"Mike's talked about you. Lucas too. They were both a little vague on...what is it you...," Will turns on a pot of coffee, his brain scrambling for the right word. He settles on, "Do?"

"I work in neurosciences," Bryce's expression lights up. Not enough to be uncomfortable, more like fondness than overexcitement. "The brain."

Of course, Will thinks. He can't fault Mike for good intentions. He darts a quick glance at Holly, who is wandering around the living room in a circle, peeking through the windows as though checking their perimeter. "Artist sounds a little unimpressive now."

Bryce looks at Holly too. "I don't know about that, man. She asked if I wanted to meet Will Byers," he laughs. "Like you're some kind of legend."

"He does live in a creepy cabin in the woods," Holly points out.

"It's not creepy," Will scolds automatically, though he supposes meeting in the woods in the middle of the night isn't helping his image. "I'm surprised you listened."

"Honestly, I thought she might be messing with me," Bryce rubs the back of his neck, casting a flat look in Holly's direction. "But I didn't

want to risk a kid being out here alone. And I did tell Mike where I was going. He vouched for you. And, uh, says hey."

"What?" Holly sounds indignant, but Will can hear how half-hearted it is. "What part of *secret mission* don't you buttmunches understand?"

"The part where you go out of your way to keep secrets from your family," Will says. The last thing he wants to be is a knowing contributor to Holly's delinquency problem.

"Why not? It's what everyone else does."

"And how much do you like that?"

Holly falls to Will's couch, crossing her arms with a huff. "I don't know why Nancy's boss is so particular about you. All I heard him say was he didn't want your friends 'up top' knowing about Will."

Bryce draws back a little, clearly surprised. "My superiors?" Holly nods. "I don't have any. Haven't even been assigned to a hospital. But I guess I do know people. I'm sure I'll meet more. So if there's something you're doing that I shouldn't know about..."

Will shares a look with Holly.

"What has Mike told you about Hawkins?"

Eleven

Her mother is cognizant more often these days. Today is not one of those days. It reminds her there's a monster somewhere in Will's brain too and that, somehow, he's the luckier of them.

There's a half eaten cake left by Joyce earlier that afternoon. She stands to wrap it and a card falls out. It's written on the stationery from the store.

Ms. Ives

Sorry you're feeling under the weather. I hate not to see you at the store

but know we're all rooting for you! I hope this lifts your spirits.

Karen

The cake itself rests on a stack of vinyls. She presents the uppermost one. "Brothers Four?" Her mother smiles, which is a yes if she ever saw one. She sets it to playing and moves around the kitchen, wrapping up the remainder of the cake.

When she makes it back to her mother's side, Terry is humming and Eleven takes a moment to process the words coming from the player.

Deep in December it's nice to remember although you know the snow will follow

Deep in December it's nice to remember without the hurt the heart is hollow

Deep in December it's nice to remember the fire of September that made us mellow

Deep in December our hearts should remember and follow...

"It's pretty, Mama," she reaches over to kiss the other woman's temple. Her mother hums in agreement. "I wrapped up Mrs. Wheeler's cake. I'm going home now."

"Follow," she hears her mother sing down the hall after her.

Eleven whistles all the way home.

6. Nancy and Mike, Partners in Science

Summary for the Chapter:

Thanks to alamorn and goddamnrey for betaing <3

Notes for the Chapter:

Writing has been fighting me, this story has been fighting me the hardest, and this chapter was particularly heinous. I write a lot, and a lot of what I write teaches me something. Lately I've felt as though I've not been learning anything. It's been a process of just churning something out that I don't feel great about; a real slog. But reading through some of the comments I've gotten, particularly on AtMM and this piece, really helped push me through. So a) thank you for reading and b) thank you for your patience.

Nancy

Ficken corners Nancy when she's analyzing the vocal progression of the Encantada they caught last spring.

"I don't know how, I don't know when, but Castillo and Byers have definitely made contact."

"That didn't take long," she turns off the soothing background noise and reaches for her sandwich. "What tipped you off?"

Ficken looks distinctly uncomfortable. "It's a hunch."

She snorts. "*A hunch?* You made our Venezuelan team send you an actual fang before you requisitioned equipment for them to deal with that Basilisk infestation and now you want me to believe you follow *hunches?*"

Ficken rests his chin between thumb and forefinger. "Your brother and Mr Castillo spent all day yesterday between Mr Sinclair and Mr Henderson. All told, it was an extraordinarily quiet day. Even when

Mr Byer's name was mentioned, there was no attempt to continue the conversation. If I didn't know any better, I would call him uninterested."

"You know, despite how we bill ourselves, not everyday with the Wheelers is an adventure." Ficken makes a noise that can only be described as a 'hrm' and which reminds Nancy, faintly, of Marge Simpson. "Bryce isn't uninterested in Will. You're witnessing an interaction between functioning human beings. He and Lucas are pals, apparently," she shrugs. "And Dustin gets along with everyone. Even you."

By the look he gives her, she can tell Ficken still doesn't believe her.

"What does it matter?" She throws the foil around her sandwich near the trash. "Worst case scenario, he meets Will, can't do anything, makes a few calls and maybe," she holds up a finger, "*maybe* our bosses get word that we've got some...interesting specimens that we've been keeping to ourselves. Best case scenario, he makes him all better."

"Have your scenarios factored in the Byers family reaction?" Ficken crosses his arms. "I don't know what's worse, honestly. He does something we can't protect him from or cures him where we couldn't. What kind of power does that give us?"

"Is that what this is?" Nancy grins. "Chicken? Keeping the upper hand until Joyce or, oh, *Will* comes running to *us* for help? Are you out of your fucking mind?" He blinks at her, always a little startled when she curses no matter how often he hears it. "Not gonna happen, Theodore."

Ficken is quiet for longer than Nancy likes.

"Terry Ives."

"What?"

"You said the worst that could happen would be someone above our station catching wind of Will? Of Jane and anything else I've hidden for you?" He says, his eyes flat. "That's the worst that can happen *to*

us. The worst that can happen to Will is experiencing what Terry Ives went through, if you believe in a fate worse than death.”

Nancy thinks of the picture of Barb, faded and folded at one edge.

“I don’t.”

“Hey, Nance!” Two heads turn at the arrival of Aaron, cheerful as always. “Phone call from...oh.”

Well, cheerful until his eyes land on Ficken. If there’s one thing Nancy’s learned from working with the man for the past two years, it’s that he can pull a mean stinkeye.

An annoyed Ficken looks more like Ladyhawke when she hasn’t been fed. “I thought I said no personal calls at work.”

“I thought you said I’d get a holiday bonus,” Aaron counters, lip curled. “So I guess we’re just a roomful of liars.” His smile is even more blinding when he turns it back towards Nancy. “Dustin’s on line one for you Nancy.” And, like a switch, it’s off again, as he holds up a hand before Ficken can open his mouth. “Don’t talk to me, I’m taking my break.”

Nancy covers the receiver of the phone until Aaron’s out of the room. Ficken stares at the phone; Nancy rolls her eyes and opens her conversation with, “Hi, Dustin. Theodore wants you to stop calling me at work.”

“He’s not *my* boss.” Dustin’s known Ficken since he was fourteen, as annoying and untrustworthy then as he is now. Any shady government operative fear Ficken had hoped to strike into the hearts of the people of Hawkins had probably been dashed a decade ago when he showed up to the boy’s science fair to cheer them on in Nancy’s place.

“He says the hospital needs better equipment for its neurology wing,” she translates, diplomatically.

“I doubt that.”

“C’mon, Ficken,” Nancy says encouraging. “It’s Christmas. Give a

little.”

Ficken uncrosses his arms and turns to leave. “Bah humbug.”

“Sorry, no luck,” Nancy says. “We were just talking about you, were your ears burning?”

“Can you talk?” Dustin says, after a quiet moment.

Nancy leans over her console with a sigh, adjusting a few knobs until the ambient noise of Encantada song fills the room. “Go ahead.”

“You told me to tell you about anything weird or suspicious,” he says, haltingly. “Does Bryce...possibly stealing a patient's chart fall under that?”

Nancy adjusts her head, minutely, eyes fixed on the door. “It would. Why?”

“Why do you think, stupid?”

When Nancy hangs up, she dials Mike's number.

Nancy knows, theoretically, what happens next: Nancy will catch Jonathan and Steve up on the events of the past two days, wait for Mike at the house, get the equipment they need, and meet whatever awaits them at the hospital. Almost like old times. Hell, *safer* than old times.

Steve and Jonathan can tell something is going on the second she steps in the door. Probably because she sets a large briefcase down by her feet, and steadfastly refuses to look at it. Hardly a good sign. It's only six in the evening. Shower first, she thinks, stories later.

“Welcome home,” Steve purses his lips, eyeing the briefcase from his spot on the couch.

“Mike’s coming for dinner,” Nancy pushes his head back to place a kiss on his forehead then turns her attention to the kitchen door frame. “Need help?”

"It's a crock pot," Jonathan raises a brow. "I think I can handle it, Julia Childs."

She smacks his shoulder, but leans up to press a kiss to his cheek as well. "I'm going to shower then."

That's the thing about theories, she reflects, an hour later as she opens the door to see not only Mike, but her mother and Holly as well. *Variables*.

"Guys," she opens the door to slowly allow them in. "What are...you *all* doing here?"

"Michael's friend was feeling under the weather," Karen crunches the snow off of her boots, turning to hang up she and Holly's coat. "Encouraged us to eat somewhere nice without him."

"Mom?" Nancy gives her a significant look.

Karen lowers her voice to match Nancy's tone. "Holly's therapist says it would be good for her to see us trying...and I'd *like* to."

"Dad?" Nancy doesn't look past Karen's shoulder but it's a near thing.

"I'm working on that," Karen says. "It's not going to be quick."

Nancy nods, stepping aside to let her mother pass into the main room. She steps back to block Mike. "You couldn't have ditched them, I don't know, literally anywhere else?" she hisses.

"Have you ever tried to *ditch* Mom? Or, Jesus, Holly?" he lobs back, throwing air quotes around ditch.

"It smells lovely, Nancy!" Karen says from behind her.

"Thank Jonathan," Nancy says, finally moving into the house with the rest of her family. She feels a perverse delight in the straightening of her mother's back. Then she sees how uncomfortable *Jonathan* looks and backs off. It's going to be bad enough without her needling.

"Thank you, Jonathan."

"You're welcome, Ms Wheeler."

"Karen?" Steve *What Do You Mean Parents Make You Uncomfortable*
Harrington steps out of the bedroom. "Hey! How are you?"

"Steve!" she lets herself be pulled into a hug. "I'm...well, hungry."

"Let's set the table," Steve laughs.

"I'll do it," Holly jumps at the chance to escape.

Nancy takes a deep breath. She needs to get her brother away from the rest of her family. She needs to explain what's going on to Jonathan, to Steve. She needs...

Nancy needs to get through dinner without wearing a hole in the floor. The only person who's said a word beyond 'Pass this' or 'Excuse me' is Steve. She's ready to cite work and head out on her own when Holly's voice breaks through the silence.

"Jonathan, I took that career placement test you sent me."

"Oh yeah?"

"Career placement?" Karen swallows a mouthful of peas to ask.

"It's like...a quiz online to match your interests with jobs. Most people only take it when they're older but, like, what's the point *then*? Why waste my time prepping for something I'm not going to do?"

Karen nods along, eyes moving between Jonathan and Holly. Nancy nudges her sister under the table. "Judging by how relieved you sound I'm going to take a wild stab in the dark and say the result wasn't scientist."

"Ew, no," Holly doesn't bother hiding her disgust. "No offense, Mike."

"Hey!" Nancy laughs.

"Well," Mike prompts her, "don't leave us in suspense."

"I got lawyer," she wiggles her nose. "And detective. Those were my top two."

Lawyer, Nancy thinks, locking eyes with her mom, whose expression is a mix of started and pleased. Well, she *can* hold her own in an argument...

"Detective suits you," Jonathan says.

Holly's smile lights up her whole face. "You think?"

Steve nods. "Let me know if you want an in at the station."

"*Detective*, Steve, not a cop."

"One quiz and she's already trying to pull rank on me," Steve stares hard at Jonathan. "What have you done?"

Conversation isn't exactly easier after that, but it's a place to start. At least they're talking. Her mother excuses herself to the bathroom when dishes are being cleaned. Nancy makes a beeline for the front door, kneeling in front of the briefcase and pressing her thumbs into the tabs at the top until it clicks open.

The Encantada's song starts slow and soft. By the time she makes it to the bathroom, where her mother is washing her hands, it's much louder.

Karen sighs when she sees Nancy in the mirror.

"I'm *trying*, Nanc--"

"I didn't call Mike for dinner because I thought he wasn't eating properly," Nancy cuts her off. "I called him for work."

Honesty. Something her mom claims to want more of. To the woman's credit, she only balks slightly.

"Are we in danger?"

"No," Nancy says. "But Holly likes to..., " Nancy tries to phrase *poke her nose in where it doesn't belong* in the least hypocritical way possible

and finds each new attempt lacking.

“Does this have something to do with that odd phone call?” Karen asks. “Your predictions?”

“What’s that music?” Holly’s voice is very close, and when Nancy turns her sister is pointing in the direction of the front door.

Nancy curses, ignoring the reprimand in Karen’s expression. She had counted on at least one of the three others to keep Holly busy. But, as always, *variables*.

“You guys talking about Will?” Holly crosses her arms. “I *know* Bryce isn’t sick. Who do you think introduced them?”

Mike’s upper body pops around the corner of the doorframe. “I was going to tell you...uh, well,” he ducks his head. “When Mom left. Sorry, Mom.”

Karen shakes her head, arms raised a little defensively. “I have no idea what you all are talking about, as usual.” She takes a deep breath. “This has to do with Joyce’s youngest?”

“Can we have this conversation *outside* of the bathroom, please?” Nancy motions the group towards the living room.

Between Holly, Mike, and Nancy, it’s a matter of minutes to fill the other three on the past week. It would have taken less, but Holly knows far more than Nancy wishes she did and Nancy has to keep pausing to ask *how*.

Steve keeps glancing up at Holly with the closest thing Nancy’s seen to disappointment he’s ever had to aim in her direction. Jonathan is obviously shaken, most likely by the secondhand account of Nancy’s latest exchange with Ficken. She can read the conflict on Jonathan’s face; torn between working in Will’s best interest and outside of his knowledge or desire. Their age-old argument.

Still, all he says is, “So what now?”

“Well, the second I turned that on,” she points to the briefcase, “Ficken probably started trying to work out what was going on. He

was half there already so when I shut it down we,” she motions between Mike and herself, “are going to break into the high school science lab--”

“There’s a project Lucas and I have been working on. We can’t risk calling him but he won’t mind, I promise.” Mike seems in a rush to reassure a silent Karen. Then again, she’s the only one in the room who looks remotely shocked.

“Then we go to the hospital and see what Bryce has to say.”

“¿Y qué quieres que hagamos? ¿Esperar al lado del teléfono?” Steve crosses his arms. “I know you can handle yourself but you want us to sit on our hands?”

Nancy looks to Jonathan, who relaxes the press of his lips long enough to say, “You’re talking about *my* brother, Nancy.”

She opens her mouth, unsure of how much to say to them in front of, well, her family. Her eyes catch on her mother and she thinks of her father and...well mostly, she’s tired.

“Listen,” she takes a sharp breath, but stops at the feel of a small hand on her elbow.

“Let me go,” Holly says. “To the school, I mean.”

It’s hard to say who protests first, between three shared *no*’s. More interesting to Nancy is that Mike and *Jonathan* say nothing.

“I can do it!” Holly shakes Nancy’s elbow, pleading.

Mike shoots Nancy a considering look. “It’d save us some time.”

“No, absolutely not,” Karen snaps back into the conversation with a bitter laugh. Holly lets go and turns to her. Nancy can’t read her expression from here but her spine is ramrod straight. She watches her mother’s expression slowly fall before she turns to look across the room. “Steve?”

Steve takes a great breath. “I’ll go with her.”

Holly is clearly fighting a smile as she bounces over for instructions from Mike. Steve turns on his heel and heads to the bedroom, Jonathan following after a quick glance to Nancy.

Jonathan rounds on her as soon as he hears her enter. "So what is it this time?" She had been prepared for Steve, rattling around the cabinets and muttering to himself. She should have guessed Jonathan was the one who would be *truly* angry. Steve could have a quick temper but Jonathan let things build, and he'd been sitting on this one for a while. "What are we really walking into, Wheeler?"

"Nothing, I swear--"

"Nothing? That's funny when have we heard that, Steve?"

"Jonathan..," Steve trails off a warning, half-muffled as he pulls on his protective vest.

"Eighty four? Nothing, guys just a crack in the fabric of reality. Eighty six? Nothing, honestly, just a demogorgon. *Eighty eight*. Nothing much, only a new branch of the agency establishing itself."

"Ninety was fun," Steve smiles, testing the light on his chest.

"*Ninety!*" Jonathan's laugh is high pitched. He claps and points with both hands as though he's just remembered something. "Nothing! Just a gorgon infestation--"

"I had no idea about that!"

"We were on vacation, Nancy!"

"Nance," Steve mutters just loud enough to draw their attention. "You have to admit that sometimes things...go sideways when your people are involved."

Nancy leans against the door. "I know! That's why I kept them out of the equation, as much as I could." Jonathan sits on the edge of the bed. She feels like the room releases a tangible breath. "From here on out, if anything goes wrong, you'll know the second I do."

"No monsters where I'm taking Holly?" Steve holds up a stilling hand.

"None at the school," she hedges and he nods, moving past her.

"Could this really help Will?" Jonathan asks when they're alone. The unasked question is there too, *Why didn't you tell us sooner?*

"Mike gave it a lot of thought. It took him a long time to convince *me*...and then I didn't want to get your hopes up." She holds out a hand and he takes it with a slow nod.

"All right," he stands, pulling her out to the living room. "All right, we'll talk about it later. I'm picking my mom up."

"One less stop for Steve to make," she tugs her arm back to lace their fingers together. "Pick up Jane, too."

Mike is still drilling Holly when they draw closer. "You know where everything is?"

"I have eyes, Mike."

"Okay, we've been working on something that looks like this," he pulls out a piece of paper and hands it to her.

"It looks like an electronic cheese grater."

"It's called a...," Mike takes a deep breath through his nose. "Never mind. Just grab that and don't touch anything else okay?"

"Fine, buzzkill."

Mike

They find Bryce and Will in a patient's room. Judging by the posters on the wall and some of the reading material, Mike would guess neurology. None of them think to ask where Bryce had moved whoever had been staying here. Will looks comfortable, at least, in hospital clothes and flipping through a leaflet about early-onset Alzheimer's. It makes Mike and Nancy tense up. Mike suspects it

always will.

“Hey Will,” Mike takes a step towards the bed. “Sorry I didn't come see you--”

“Or call, or send an email,” Will lists off in a drawl, laying back against the pillows. He quirks a grin. “Whatever, it's cool.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah don't make it weird.”

“What the hell am I looking at?” Bryce interrupts, holding out the scans of Will's brain. Mike knows what's there.

“Shall I?” Nancy asks when no one speaks, closing the door quietly behind herself. “It's an illithid tadpole that worked its way into Will's head.”

Bryce stares from her to the slides and back to her with a blank expression.

“He's told you about the Upside Down?” Bryce nods. “For the sake of simplicity, if Will had stayed...outside of the quarantined area, he would have turned into a big version of *that*. If the Gates had stayed open, his brain would have rotted to mush. We were too late to stop the ceremorphosis, but the tadpole got pulled back to the other side,” she says, studiously avoiding all eyes but Bryce's. “Unfortunately so did some of Will.”

“These spots here,” Bryce points to three places on the first slide. “They're just *gone*. By all accounts he,” Bryce looks at Will, “you shouldn't be functioning.”

“It's not missing.” Will looks over his shoulder, straightening his gown. “It's--”

“Being held hostage,” Bryce sounds far away. “You said.”

“Well if you've never seen the Upside Down firsthand I can understand why you wouldn't believe me.”

"Brain parasite, creature from another world, you all believe what you want, I'm not here to judge," Bryce says, *obviously* judging. "I just want to know what you're expecting me to do about it."

"We have something that might...fix it," Mike says, leaning against the bed. "Lucas and I mocked it up after we attended your seminar on the benefits of the Leksell Gamma Knife."

Bryce's eyes widen when he catches his meaning. "...Mike, I'm not a neurosurgeon."

"We're not asking you to perform radiosurgery. We're asking you to point the...", Nancy trails off.

"Cranial Laser."

"Lucas is going to hate that," she shakes her head. "The *Cranial Laser* where it needs to go and shoot."

Bryce looks between them, but his gaze eventually drifts back to Will. "I only brought you out here for a scan."

"If you're going to warn me about the dangers of brain surgery, you can save it," Will holds up a hand. "I might know more about your field than you do with the amount of reading I've done."

"And you're okay with this?" Whatever Bryce sees on Will's face must reassure him. He turns back to them, looking a little grim. "I'll get him prepped if you call Dustin. He's the only one of you with actual medical experience."

"I'll find one of the medical pagers," Nancy suggests.

Mike rolls his eyes. "Find, she says."

"I can't believe you guys moved Mr Banner," Dustin says, scrubbing in at the sink. "And without telling me anything!"

"We needed the room. And I did tell you I was planning something." Mike tries, but it sounds weak even to him.

"I thought you meant a *party*," Dustin pulls his mask up. "I bought balloons!"

"Sorry," Mike smiles just a little.

"If this gets me fired," he holds up a finger, then another, "or Will killed? You're paying me back for the balloons."

"It'll work!" he calls after the other man's back as he disappears into the surgical ward. Then he turns and heads back to the waiting room.

Joyce and Hopper are outside, talking quietly. Mike thinks about approaching them but Lucas knocks on the frame of the waiting room door, signaling his attention.

"Here," he hands Mike a cup of coffee. "For someone doing none of the work, you sure look beat."

"If I had known you were still at work I wouldn't have sent Holly with so many instructions," Mike sits, sipping from the cup. "Take a break. Go home sometime. Watch TV."

"No thanks," Lucas looks around the mostly empty room. "All of this makes me wish we'd kept up with our radios."

"Ficken would have found some way into those too."

"Ah, we're smarter than Ficken, especially with both Wheelers," he says, but low, as the man in question is standing across the room beside Nancy, looking pinch-faced since having caught up with things just in time to be too late. Lucas turns to make his way towards Nancy. "By the way, I'm not naming *my* machine the Cranial Laser."

"You got it, boss." Mike smiles. A few seats to his right, Jonathan's foot is tapping restlessly. Mike knows it's probably unsanitary but he holds out his coffee. Jonathan looks startled, then fond, shaking his head.

It's another few minutes before everyone is in the room, fidgeting or focused on whatever treat Steve and Eleven brought them from the vending machines. So much of hospitals is exchanging 'how have you been's and waiting rooms living up to their name. Joyce looks

surprisingly placid. Mike pats Eleven's knee, pressed against his own, and watches her finish off her Nutter Butter with patterned precision before standing and crossing the room.

Joyce smiles at him as he chooses the seat next to hers, which he takes as encouragement. "Hey, Ms Byers, how are you?"

"Better now that I know he," she motions towards Ficken, who hasn't glanced at her or Hopper once since they entered, "had nothing to do with this. Steve tells me it was you and your sister who concocted everything."

"Concocted sounds nefarious," Mike winces but he knows his tone is too light to pull off any real guilt. "I'm sorry we didn't tell you anything."

"Will's smart," she nods a few times like she's trying to convince herself. "He wouldn't have done anything he didn't want to. Maybe he'll travel after this."

"Steve says Costa Rica's nice this time of year."

Joyce actually laughs. "I was thinking Disneyworld, but if he can leave Hawkins? What the hell, wherever he wants."

"How about Disneyland?" Mike grins wide at the possibility, and Joyce reaches out to muss his hair.

It doesn't matter that Mike got them all here, he still feels trapped. Waiting rooms do that; instill a lazy sort of impatience. Hurry up and wait. It's another rerun of MASH before Dustin shoulders the door of the room open and tells them Will is, as far as they can tell, *fine*. He's recuperating, they'll run scans, and a few other lines that Mike's sure are important but don't really register because...*fine*.

Joyce and Jonathan rush Dustin with a series of questions that his wide eyes look unready or unable to answer. Mike has pressing concerns of his own, but his attention is drawn to Ficken-- who had not sat once--now rounding on his sister. Dustin sees it too, and manages to pause whatever he's saying behind the blue mask, pulling it down to speak across the divide, straight to the man.

"Hey, Bryce understands none of this happened." Dustin says, taking off his cap as well. "But he'll probably have questions."

"We'll answer them," Nancy suggests placidly.

"What he knows is too much already," Ficken argues.

"He's a good guy," Mike doesn't remember standing, but he's unsurprisingly at Nancy's side.

"Not good enough--"

Hopper moves between the unit that is the Wheeler siblings and, like a shadow especially for how wiry he remains, Steve stands beside his shoulder. "Do you think we can't keep him from saying something ourselves? Trust me, whatever you're going to threaten him with, we've got our own ways."

Mike isn't sure if it's intentional but he knows Eleven well enough to say *it's likely* that she chooses this moment to throw away her drink and lean against a nearby wall.

Ficken's jaw tightens. He rolls his shoulders, looking beyond them, focusing on none of them. "Fax me a copy of the results, Wheeler, and don't bother coming to clean your office." Ficken nods to Nancy, who steps aside to let him through to the door. Joyce is not so easily moved. "I am...*satisfied* that Will Byers is well," he manages and it may be just enough of a surprise to jolt her into action. Likely, she just wants to see the back of him.

His mother is standing just outside the doorway as Ficken leaves, holding a box from Sherry's Bakery like a shield of cardboard and pastry. "I didn't know the protocol...", she seems to steel herself with every step further inside. "Is Will all right?"

Whatever Joyce responds with Mike can't hear, as she pulls the other woman into a hug. He uses the motion to his advantage, slipping past the women and through the door, winding his way through the near-empty hallways until he sees a familiar back entering a room of the recovery ward. Inside the room, Will is turned on his side between the thin, blue sheets, his head wrapped in white gauze.

“He’s in and out,” Bryce explains below the room’s whiteboard. There’s a name there Mike doesn’t recognize, but Bryce quickly removes it with a swipe of his sleeve before he turns around. He’s tossing the *Cranial Laser* (as Mike will forever and always refer to it in the safety of his mind) from one hand to the other. “You beat his mom back here?”

“She was distracted,” Mike says, distracted himself. He isn’t sure what to say but he thinks an apology might be a good place to start. “I’m really sorry, Bryce. About...all of this.”

“You hid stuff from me.” *Toss*, “Used me.” *Toss*. “Apparently nearly got me dragged into a government conspiracy--”

“Now wait a minute, I worked very hard *not* to drag you into a conspiracy,” Mike steps forward to catch the device in mid-toss. “That was the whole point!”

“Well, you dragged me to Hawkins for the holidays,” Bryce counters. “So I lose either way. But I have to admit I’m impressed with what you and Lucas have done.”

Mike examines the laser. Bryce’s hand closes over it, pulling it back towards himself.

“But you met me.” Mike’s head whips towards the bed at Will’s indignant croaking. “Now let’s be honest, that makes you a winner, Doctor Castillo.”

“I’ll go rescue Dustin,” Bryce’s face crinkles with laughter. He taps the laser against the palm of his hand. “And finish this, I guess. Part of the deal with the Chief of Surgery, I’m going to bring Banner in and see if this puppy can do anything for him.”

“Godspeed,” Mike says to Bryce’s disappearing back. “How are you feeling?”

Will rolls his eyes to stare at him for an uncomfortable amount of time. It’s likely *more* uncomfortable for Will...which is some comfort to Mike. “Like shit.”

“If this works, you can come to California. Though you should know

your mom suggested Florida.”

“She would,” Will closes his eyes and smiles. He’s obviously only half-awake, but he stares at the ceiling, mouthing for a moment, to make sure that his next words are clear. “How do I feel? I *feel*, Mike. I know all of you know, you know?” And Mike doesn’t laugh because he *does* know. “That thing took a chunk out of me. I couldn’t leave for years, and I was so angry, for such a long time. I shut it all down because I knew it wasn’t anyone’s fault. And because I didn’t want to *be* angry at everyone. Now it’s like I’m feeling everything...and it hurts.”

“I don’t know if I’m leaving, honestly. I just like having the choice,” Will adjusts his pillows like he’s getting ready for room service, not more difficult conversation. “I’m a little scared to leave now. Just a little. That’s the worst thing it did to me. It took away whatever bravery I had, keeping me in Hawkins for so long.”

“To hell with that, Will.” In one, loud, scratching noise, Mike’s pulled a seat beside the bed and tossed himself into it. “You just laid down on an operating table and let a relative stranger cut into your head with an untested device because you *might* get a taste of the outside world. No, that thing did *not* take away your bravery. You’ve never stopped being brave.”

Will turns away, briefly, to wipe at his face. When he turns back, his grin eases the knot of tension in Mike’s chest. “Yeah, I think I’ll try California first. Since you won’t shut up about it.”

“I think you’ll like it.”

”Does Steve seem weird to you?”

Mike slaps Holly’s hand away from his (very alcoholic, or at the very least too alcoholic for his fifteen year old sister) egg nog. “Yeah, Steve is, and has always been weird.”

She goes silent in the chair beside him. Mike forgets sometimes that, despite their teasing, Harrington has been something like a guardian to her. Particularly in the place where their father misstepped, which

he can imagine was often. It's easier to place the role on Jonathan. Mike's admittedly never gotten past the image of Steve climbing into Nancy's window, even after he'd graduated to awkward, if earnest, cop and friend.

"Why?" Mike is obviously leading, speaking near-robotically, but Holly is recalcitrant enough not to care. "Is Steve acting weird to you?"

"Definitely," she picks up her own drink and cradles it between her knees. "Is Nancy going with you guys after Christmas?"

"If she is she hasn't told me about it." CalTech was always begging Nancy to pick up lectures, and with her being fired it was a real possibility now, Mike knew. Holly twists the glass between her knees. She's never snapped at him or raised her voice, even when she was being a little snot about something, and he doesn't expect her to now. Then again, she's never really taken his advice about much, either. Still..., "You know, if you don't want her to go, you should say something."

Holly bites her bottom lip, looking over her shoulder and around the back of her chair. Mike copies the motion. The others in the room are occupied with one another, as far as he can tell. "I think Jonathan and Steve want to stay. I think they're fighting."

"Couples fight." The words slip out of his mouth before he considers them, his hand tightening around nothing, reflexively. He leans forward to grab his glass for something to do, and casts a casual glance in Holly's direction. She still looks a little nervous, a little forlorn beneath that.

Nancy and Mike have never spoken about what was happening with that situation, even after Nancy and their dad stopped speaking three years ago. Mike leans back with his glass and a sigh. She never brought it up, so it only seemed fair that Mike followed the course. But...Holly lived with them sometimes and, when she wasn't, the examples she looked to were Ted and Karen Wheeler.

"I mean fight like...", Mike tries to remember what he felt like at fifteen, but at fifteen he was fighting literal monsters. His parents

relationship, his own family, took something of a backseat to the fate of the world (or the world as he knew it at fifteen, which amounted to Hawkins, Indiana). “Fight like normal people can’t agree on everything, you know?”

“I go to a therapist, dummy,” Holly rolls her eyes, setting her now empty glass upside down on the table. “I know that one fight doesn’t, like, destroy a relationship or whatever. But they didn’t know anything about this, you know? I think they’re pretty pissed,” she finishes in a whisper, looking around again. Mike sees Steve by the pie table, looking over Will’s shoulder until Will literally snaps in his face to grab his attention...and, yeah, that seems a little weird.

Mike moves a coaster under Holly’s flipped glass, ignoring her soft utterance of *mom* as she presses a booted toe into his shin. “I don’t know what to tell you, Holly.”

She makes a drawn out, ponderous noise. “Tell me...how many years it takes to be a detective.”

Mike can feel his whole face wrinkle up. “I don’t know, Holly.”

“Guess.”

“Five years? Six?”

She grabs the arms of her chair and scoots forward until she slides up and out. “Thanks, Mike! I’m going to talk to Nancy.”

Holly’s almost completely disappeared from the dining room by the time Mike speaks again. “I’m not sure what I did, but you’re welcome.”

For a self-proclaimed hermit, Mike finds that Will has a startling amount of luggage. It hadn’t taken much convincing to have him get rid of the craft projects. As it turned out, he thought they were ‘uglier than sin’ and ‘more fun to break than create’.

They *had* been fun to break.

Nancy shows up to see them off, dressed down and entirely bagless.

"Decided not to come?" Mike tosses a smaller bag in, shoving it into a corner of the trunk.

"I'll visit once you're settled." she tucks her hands into her pockets. "I need to take care of some things here." Mike leans against the left taillight and waits her out as she she picks at a nail. "I think Mom might actually go through with it; divorcing Dad. So if Holly needs anything...."

"Ah," he draws a breath in through his teeth, bends down to throw the last few items in.

Nancy squints against the sun. "And I don't think my relationship could take the hit right now, if I can be honest with you. And myself."

Mike shuts the trunk, the sound it makes seemingly too quiet, not dramatic enough, for the subject at hand. *They don't talk about this*, after all. But here she is, talking. He feels obliged to ask, at least this once. "Is Jonathan still upset? Are you guys...I mean are you worried?" She looks surprised. He feels like it was the right thing to say.

"Neither one of them are happy with me," Nancy wipes a hand across her brow. "Never work with the government, no matter what you tell yourself to go to sleep at night."

"Yeah, *duh*." It's not the most poignant thing to say--too much time with Holly, maybe--but it makes Nancy laugh.

"I'm more worried about Will, and whatever we did here. I've messed up before and you know what they say. Fool me once--"

"Pretty sure you've been fooled more than once."

"Shut up, Mike," she pushes his shoulder.

"I wouldn't lose sleep over it," he rubs his shoulder in mock hurt. "Dustin says his neurology patient--the one whose room we, um, commandeered--is on the up and up. Turns out switching rooms was good for him."

Nancy's lips turn up into a smirk. "You mean after Bryce...", she points her fingers out in a firing motion. "*Zap!* "

"No way, you know that *other* saying? About lightning striking in the same place twice--"

"Which is *completely* untrue!"

"In this case it was right. Nothing to do with the laser, as far as we can tell. He started talking before Bryce could take him in!" Mike shrugs. "No more signs of seizures. Dustin says they're releasing him next week."

"Something in the air?" Nancy holds her chin in a way that's eerily reminiscent of Ficken. "We should get the EPA in there, just to double check. Or...oh."

"You just remember you're not on Ficken's payroll anymore?" Mike asks to a slowly frowning Nancy.

"Well," she tightens her jaw, "we can ask the family to call it in. Or Dustin."

"You do that, Ms Paranoid. But just remember, Will's fine," he grabs her shoulders and gives her a little shake. "We did good, Sis!"

Nancy drops her hand, a reluctant grin spreading across her face. "That's the working theory."

That's the thing about theories.

Variables

Author's Note:

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